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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE VISIT OF GENERAL NORTH AND
BRIGADIER GENERAL CROWE

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle, reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

11. (C) General North and Brigadier General Crowe, Embassy Bangkok welcomes your visit to Thailand during the celebration of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's 82nd birthday. Your visit signals the United States' appreciation for the long-standing bilateral relationship, which has facilitated shared benefits in the fields of security, law enforcement, and intelligence efforts, as well as groundbreaking health/research collaboration and long-standing refugee support. Your visit affords the opportunity to affirm our support for our important mil-mil relationship, after a stretch of time in which it has appeared to many Thai that the U.S. places decreasing importance on that relationship and engaging top Thai military leaders, even as China's romance effort expands.

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

12. (C) After the December 2008 installation of the Democrat-led coalition government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, Thailand has experienced a period of relative political stability. That said, Thailand remains deeply divided, politically and socially, and struggles to break free of an inward focus. The traditional elite, urban middle class and the mid-south are on largely one side (Democrat in parliament, "yellow" in the street) and the political allies of fugitive former PM Thaksin, with largely rural supporters in the North and Northeast on the other (opposition Puea Thai in parliament, "red" in the street). Abhisit generally has progressive instincts about basic freedoms, social inequities, foreign policy, and how to address the troubled deep South. The Prime Minister's approval ratings have benefited, at least temporarily, from a problematic period for Thaksin subsequent to his badly chosen comments to the "The Times" of London on royal succession and an ill-advised visit to Cambodia following his appointment as economic advisor to Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen.

13. (C) Despite relatively higher approval ratings, Abhisit remains beset by a fractious coalition, vigorous parliamentary opposition in the form of a large block of politicians under the Puea Thai Party banner, and street protests from "red-shirts." The most dramatic political development of the past year was the mid-April United Front of Democracy for Dictatorship (UDD), or "reds", riots in Bangkok and Pattaya, which led to the postponement of a regional Asian Summit and burned busses in Bangkok. UDD have been planning a return to the streets, possibly with a "final showdown" rally that would begin November 28, but the rally was called off November 25 out of respect for the King's

birthday celebrations. Thaksin himself has suggested to supporters that he did not know how long he could "ask the red shirts to be tolerant."

14. (C) While both yellow and red try to lay exclusive claim to the mantle of democracy, neither side of this split is as democratic as it claims to be. Both movements reflect deep social concerns stemming from widespread perceptions of a lack of social and economic justice, but both seek to triumph in competing for traditional Thai hierarchical power relationships. New elections would not appear to be a viable solution to the political divide, and political discord could persist for years. We continue to stress to Thai interlocutors the need for all parties to avoid violence and respect democratic norms within the framework of the constitution and rule of law, as well as our support for long-time friend Thailand to work through its current difficulties and emerge as a more participatory democracy.

RECEDING MONARCHY

15. (C) Underlying the political tension in Bangkok is the future of the monarchy. On the throne for 62 years, the U.S.-born King Bhumibol is Thailand's most prestigious figure, with influence far beyond his constitutional mandate. Many actors are jockeying for position to shape the expected transition period Thailand during royal succession after the eventual passing of the King, who is currently in poor health and rarely seen in public anymore. Few observers believe that the deep political and social divides can be bridged until after King Bhumibol passes and Thailand's tectonic

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plates shift. Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn neither commands the respect nor displays the charisma of his beloved father, who greatly expanded the prestige and influence of the monarchy during his 62-year reign. Nearly everyone expects the monarchy to shrink and change in function after succession. How much will change is open to question, with many institutions, figures, and political forces positioning for influence, not only over redefining the institution of monarchy but, equally fundamentally, what it means to be Thai.

ENDURING BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

16. (C) Despite the domestic political divide, Thailand's strategic importance to the U.S. should not be understated. Our military engagement affords us unique training venues in Asia, training exercises that are nearly impossible to match elsewhere in Asia, a willing participant in international peacekeeping operations, essential access to facilities amid vital sea and air lanes that support contingency and humanitarian missions, and a partner that is a key ASEAN nation in which we continue to promote democratic ideals.

17. (C) The U.S.-Thai military relationship began during World War II when the U.S. trained hundreds of Thais as part of the "Free Thai Movement" that covertly conducted special operations against the Japanese forces occupying Thailand and drew closer during the Korean War era when Thailand provided troops for the UN effort. Thai soldiers, sailors, and airmen also fought side-by-side with U.S. counterparts in the Vietnam War and, more recently, Thailand sent contingents to Afghanistan and Iraq.

18. (C) The relationship has evolved into a partnership that provides the U.S. with unique benefits. As one of five U.S. treaty allies in Asia and straddling a major force projection air/sea corridor, Thailand remains crucial to U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Underpinning our strong bilateral relations is the U.S.-Thai security relationship, which is based on over fifty years of close cooperation. The relationship has advanced USG interests while developing Thai military, intelligence, and law

enforcement capabilities.

IMPORTANT MILITARY ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM

¶9. (C) Thailand's willingness to allow the United States to use Utapao Naval Air Station as the hub for our regional assistance program was key to making the 2004 tsunami and the 2008 Cyclone Nargis relief operations a success. While those high-profile relief operations highlighted publicly the value of access to Utapao, the air base is used regularly for military flights. A prime example was the critical support Utapao provided during OEF by providing an air bridge in support of refueling missions en route to Afghanistan. Approximately 1,000 flights transit Utapao every year in support of critical U.S. military operations both regionally and to strategic areas of the world. Thailand also provides valued port access with U.S. naval vessels making calls, primarily at Laem Chabang, Sattahip and Phuket, over sixty times per year for exercises and visits.

COBRA GOLD AND THE MILITARY EXERCISE PROGRAM

¶10. (C) By means of access to good military base infrastructure and large areas to conduct unrestricted operations, Thailand gives the U.S. military a platform for exercises unique in Asia. Thai leaders are far more willing to host multinational exercises than are other countries in Asia. Unlike Japan, which only hosts annual bilateral exercises due to legal prohibitions over collective security, or the Philippines, where planning for multinational exercises has been difficult, or Australia, which refuses to multilateralize Tandem Thrust, the Thai government encourages multinational exercises as a way to show regional leadership. This has allowed us to use exercises in Thailand to further key U.S. objectives, such as supporting Japan's growing military role in Asia and engaging the Indonesian and Singaporean militaries.

¶11. (C) Cobra Gold, the capstone event of our exercise

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program, is PACOM's largest annual multi-lateral exercise and for 28 years has served to strengthen our relations with Thailand, highlight our commitment to Southeast Asia, and provide exceptional training opportunities for our troops. The event has evolved over the years and now facilitates important objectives such as promoting a greater role in the Asian Pacific region for Japan, Singapore, and South Korea and re-establishing a partner role with Indonesia. Along with Cobra Gold, Cope Tiger and CARAT are also key to our engagement of the Thai military.

BORDER CONFLICT WITH CAMBODIA

¶12. (C) Bilateral relations with Cambodia continue to be volatile, primarily due to a border dispute centered on 4.6 square kilometers of overlapping territorial claims adjacent to the 11th century Hindu Preah Vihear temple. Minor skirmishes have erupted three times since mid-2008, leading to the deaths of seven soldiers.

¶13. (C) The roots of the dispute lie in the Siam-France agreements of 1904-8 and a 1962 International Court of Justice ruling that granted Cambodia the temple but left the rest of disputed land unresolved. Tensions spiked in when in 2008 the Thai government in power at that time supported Cambodia's application to UNESCO for a joint listing of the temple as a world heritage site, only to face opposition in parliament and an adverse court ruling.

¶14. (C) Thorny internal political considerations and historical rancor between Thailand and Cambodia make progress difficult; the countries withdrew their Ambassadors in the

wake of Thaksin's recent appointment as an economic adviser to Cambodian leader Hun Sen. We urge both sides to resolve their differences peacefully through bilateral negotiations, border demarcation, and a reduction of troops deployed along the border.

PEACEKEEPING EFFORTS

¶15. (C) Thailand has historically been a strong supporter of UN peacekeeping missions and was an early contributing nation to operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, Thai generals very effectively led UN forces in East Timor, to which Thailand contributed 1,500 troops, and in Aceh where a Thai general served as the principal deputy of the Aceh Monitoring Mission. Thailand's success in peacekeeping has led the RTG and the military to seek a more prominent role in international stabilization and peacekeeping missions. For instance, Thailand is currently preparing for a deployment of a battalion of troops for a difficult UNAMID mission in Darfur. Using GPOI funding, we are working with the military to increase its peacekeeping capabilities, both as a contributing nation and as a trainer of neighboring nations.

ONGOING REFUGEE CONCERNS

¶16. (C) Due to inherent institutional capabilities, the Thai military plays a prominent role in the management of the many refugees that enter Thailand from neighboring countries. The Thai government conducted a screening process in January 2008 for a large group of Lao Hmong in an army run camp, reportedly to identify those who might have a legitimate fear of return to Laos, but has not released the results or informed the Hmong themselves. We believe some have a legitimate claim to refugee status, and seek resettlement in the U.S. and several other countries. Detained in an RTARF-run camp for over two years, some are former fighters (or their descendants) allied with the U.S. against the communist Pathet Lao during the IndoChina War. We want to take every opportunity to underscore to the military that the any individuals found by the RTG to have protection concerns should not be returned forcibly to Laos.

SOUTHERN THAILAND

¶17. (C) Linked to the political uncertainty in Bangkok is the RTG's inability to resolve an ethno-nationalist Malay Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand which has claimed an estimated 3,500 lives since 2004. The fundamental issues of

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justice and ethnic identity driving the violence are not unique to southern Thailand. More specifically, many Malay Muslims feel that they are second-class citizens in Thailand, and ending the insurgency will require the government to deal with these issues on a national level - which the on-going political instability in Bangkok has, to this point, prevented. In the mean time, the insurgents use IEDs, assassinations, and beheadings to challenge the control of the Thai state in the deep South. The government has responded through special security laws which give security forces expanded power to search and detain people.

¶18. (C) Southern separatists direct their anger at the government in Bangkok, not at the United States. Since a U.S. presence or perception of U.S. involvement in the South could redirect that anger towards us and link it to the international jihadist movement -- a link that is currently absent -- we ensure that any offers of assistance or training pass the "location and label" test. Put simply, we keep U.S. military personnel away from the far South and we make sure that we do not label any assistance or training as directly linked to the southern situation. Likewise, we work to avoid feeding rampant, outlandish speculation that we are somehow

fomenting the violence in the South in order to justify building permanent bases -- a very sensitive issue in Thailand. We do not want to jeopardize our access to key military facilities in Thailand like Utapao Naval Air Station.

¶19. (C) The Embassy maintains a three-pronged focus to improve our military cooperation in order to address the violence in the South:

- 1) Using our exercise and training program to improve the professional and operational skills of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, especially the Thai Army;
- 2) Helping the Thai break down stovepipes between the Thai military, police forces, and civilian agencies;
- 3) Doing everything we can to ensure the Thai respect international human rights norms as they counter the violence.

THE INCREASING ROLE OF CHINA

¶20. (C) Thai leaders continue to develop closer relations with China while simultaneously emphasizing the vital role of the U.S. in the region. While Thai military links with the United States are deeper and far more apparent than Sino-Thai links, China's growing influence in Thailand and Southeast Asia is evident in business, the arts, the media, and the military.

¶21. (C) The Chinese through hosting visits have made a strong effort to court the Thai military. The Thai military has a range of Chinese weapons systems in its arsenal; the PLA Navy is interested in closer links with the Thai navy, and China has worked with Thailand to improve air defense equipment provided to Thailand in the late 1980's. In 2007 and 2008, Thai and Chinese Special Forces conducted joint exercises, and other mil-to-mil exchanges have expanded in recent years, as has the number of bilateral military VIP visits. A yet to be finalized bilateral Marine Corps exercise between China and Thailand near the eastern seaboard port of Sattahip next year highlights the continuing push by China to expand their mil-to-mil relations with Thailand's military.

¶22. (C) As the shape of Southeast Asia, Asia writ large, and the world has changed, so have Thai attitudes. The Chinese have been making a major push to upgrade all aspects of relations, including mil-mil. Thailand is not interested in making a choice between the U.S. and China (nor do we see closer Chinese-Thai relations as automatically threatening to our interests here), but we will need to work harder to maintain the preferred status we have enjoyed.

JOHN